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Gorkhaland Movement: Ethnic Conflict and State Response by Swatahsiddha Sarkar, *New Delhi: Concept Publishing House, 2013; pp 700, Rs 700.*

Gorkhaland: Crisis of Statehood by Romit Bagchi, *New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2012; pp 480, Rs 925.*

The reorganisation of India's union states is a recurrent issue in Indian politics. At present, there are about 30 demands for new states in various parts of the country. By questioning the governmental authority and sovereignty over claimed areas, such movements do not only touch issues such as minority representation, India's dealing with its cultural diversity, governance systems, decentralisation, or the working of autonomy and federalism, but also raise broader questions regarding state–society relations, democratisation, and forms of political authority.

The importance of statehood movements was underlined in July 2013, when the government's announcement to give in to the long-standing demand for Telangana to be carved out of Andhra Pradesh sparked fierce protests in other parts of the country, where demands for Bodoland (Assam), Kamtapur (West Bengal/Assam), or Vidarbha (Maharashtra) were reiterated. Also Darjeeling District in northern West Bengal, where the first demand for an administrative separation had already been raised in 1907, observed a month-long shutdown and various protest programmes to press for the creation of "Gorkhaland".

Statehood Struggle

The Nepali-speaking population known as "Gorkhas" demands this new state to be carved out of Darjeeling District and the adjoining Dooars at the southern fringe of Bhutan. The leaders of the various regional parties argue that only the creation of a separate state can guarantee the Gorkhas, who share linguistic and cultural similarities with neighbouring Nepal, a recognised Indian identity and secure their political representation while fostering the development of the region in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Already from 1986 to 1988, the region observed a violent movement for Gorkhaland under the leadership of Subash Ghising and the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) which resulted in the formation of the autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). After 18 years of GNLF supremacy, in 2007, popular dissatisfaction with Ghising and the DGHC culminated in the formation of a new party, the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM) which revived the statehood struggle. Former GNLF leader and now GJM President Bimal Gurung proclaimed that in contrast to the 1986 movement, this movement would be "democratic, non-violent and Gandhian."

Despite his promise not to divert from the statehood agenda, after a four-year long agitation the GJM signed a deal with the newly-elected Trinamool Congress government in West Bengal and the central government for the establishment of a new autonomous council, the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). In July 2012 Bimal Gurung was elected chief of the council. Although the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, triumphantly proclaimed to have "solved" the Darjeeling problem, the fierce protests sparked by the Telangana announcement and Gurung's temporary resignation as GTA chief in July 2013, as well as the reiteration of the statehood demand by other regional parties suggests that the autonomous council model is not a durable solution to the crisis.

In response to the revived Gorkhaland demand, some books were published in recent years that look at the movement from different perspectives.

Gorkha Ethnicity

Swatahsiddha Sarkar's book (*Gorkhaland Movement: Ethnic Conflict and State Response*) looks into the working and failure of regional autonomy models. His study addressed the question of "Why do ethnic conflicts in Darjeeling hills survive despite several efforts to resolve the same from time to time?" (p 11). Grounded in the sociology of conflict resolution, he approaches this question by analysing the historical emergence of ethnic conflict in Darjeeling in response to state policy and forms of governance. Sarkar argues that a main reason for the failure of the government approach to solve such conflicts through autonomous councils is its unresponsiveness to the reality of ethnic conflict and ethnicity formation.

The author claims that in the imagination of the state, the problem of Gorkha ethnicity is expressed by a single party and its leader that represents the broader masses to forward their elitist benefits (p 130), which render its approach state-centric and elite-based. In its instrumentalist reading of Gorkha ethnicity, the state does not only fail to account for the aspirations of the broader masses, but also ignores intra-ethnic competition which fosters the emergence of new leaders that hold demands for statehood alive when the regional elite has already compromised on regional authority (p 131). Thus, instead of accounting for the horizontal construction of ethnicity which forms an important part of people's lives and culture "conflict resolution measures undertaken in ethnic conflict situations in India took care of the elites' interest and aspirations (mis) conceiving the same as the true reflection of the masses" (p 38).

Inbuilt Contradictions

Sarkar identifies a second weakness in the state's failure to address the contradictions inbuilt in its nation state project. Instead of accommodating difference through recognition and fostering a "we-ness" of Indians, autonomous councils expressed a "walling-in" of the nation's "other." This leads the author to a central finding: Autonomy packages are themselves contradictory as they

> 'exclude[s]' people of territorially concentrated and insulated cultural experiences while simultaneously 'including' them (read controlling) through the same initiative. Autonomy,

in practice, is reflective of both the notions of 'democratic exclusion' that provided room for self-rule on the one hand and 'liberal inclusion' that made available the networks of power and control by the State on the other (p 113).

Sarkar underlines his argument by tracing the emergence of ethnic conflict in Darjeeling back to the "colonial project of othering" (p 43). Through the establishment of safeguards in the form of exclusionary status for the district, the British rulers had created a belief that recognition could only be attained through privileges and protection (p 44). Sarkar argues that this "early experience of the art of being governed differently" (p 42) created an "aporia of self-rule" (p 44) amongst the Gorkhas which intensified after independence and the continuation of the othering through the exclusionary logic of nationalism (p 43). This was expressed first through the West Bengal government's denial of the recognition of Nepali as the official language of Darjeeling District in 1951 which initiated a broad cross-party movement for language inclusion. Supported by the States Reorganisation Commission's establishment of the linguistic principle as basis for administrative delimitation in 1955, political parties in Darjeeling soon detected the appeal of the ethnic chord not only to mobilise the masses, but also to negotiate their position vis-à-vis the government, which became visible in electoral politics (p 60).

Sarkar then traces the emergence of the violent movement in the 1980s back to the combined impact of political parties' regular demands for regional autonomy and language inclusion, and the discouraging government response to these demands. The problematic of the state's approach to solve ethnic conflict came strongly to the fore after the establishment of the DGHC. In view of allegations of corruption and violence against GNLF rivals, Sarkar blames the government for a "policy of least interference which […] would encourage the inter-party factionalism" (p 93). The autonomous council converted the demand for Gorkhaland into a struggle for power over the council and became a means for elite-creation in Darjeeling. Sarkar claims that this also shrank the space for democratic processes which became visible in the silencing of dissenting voices and the lack of ordinary people's participation in governmental processes, intensified through the dissolution of the three-tier panchayat system in Darjeeling (p 110). Yet, the state government's attempts to control the Gorkhaland demand through the establishment of regional elites from a selected majority party only addressed what Sarkar terms the "vertical" dimension of ethnicity which places emphasis on its formation in response to elites' programmes, while ignoring its "horizontal" formation.

> The ethnic phenomenon is not entirely an instrumental affair nor even it is an isolated and autonomous event. Its strength […] lies in the interlinkages and interplay that takes place in between the micro-realities and macro-historical structures at various levels in a fashion of constituting an organic whole, which is dynamic and plastic and that is why ethnic movements last long (p 40).

Form of 'Habitus'

In Sarkar's understanding, the ethnonational dream for recognition lived on in the form of a "habitus," referring to distinct modes of perceptions, thinking and

behaviour which reflect the inculcation of the imagining of the Gorkha homeland during childhood (p 129). Such dispositions of the broader public are expressed through and kept alive by smaller parties that emerge in opposition to the state-controlled regional elites. Such processes eventually led to the revival of the Gorkhaland demand in 2007 through the currently ruling GJM which again — contrary to its promise — signed an agreement for another autonomous council, the GTA.

The author concludes that the solution to ethnic conflict in Darjeeling does not lie in addressing developmental concerns through negotiations with elites whose representation of the population is questionable. Instead, it must ensure the participation of the broader public and address the ethnic identity question through the approach of "integrative peace" instead of "forceful assimilation" (p 133), and address the us–them divide to forge a universal "we" (p 12).

The strength of Sarkar's study lies in identifying the internal cleavages within statehood movements as important factor for the failure of autonomous council-politics in India. Instead of reproducing conventional views on movements as a unified block fighting against the government, Sarkar underlines the role of party–political elites in instrumentalising ethnic rhetoric to attain personal gains while questioning their representation of the broader masses. At the other hand, he transcends such instrumentalist reading of ethnic conflict by pointing at the horizontal ties of ethnic identity formation, expressed in his idea of Gorkhaland as habitus.

This two-sided approach to the understanding of ethnic conflict is yet only partly supported by original data. Although the author attempts to display the view of the "grass-roots" through interviews with intellectuals, one cannot but wonder why he does not include accounts of less educated and economically worse-off persons, particularly from the non-urban areas including residents from the tea plantations who form one important mass base for political parties in Darjeeling.

Despite of this shortcoming, Sarkar's well-researched and well-structured study is not only highly valuable for those interested in the history of the Gorkhaland movement and the developments after 2007 and the emergence of the GJM, the results also stimulate questioning the value of the autonomous council policy to resolve ethnic conflict in other parts of South Asia.

Crisis of Statehood

Another recently published book which attempts to probe "into the subjective world of the statehood movement" (p xv), is journalist Romit Bagchi's strong work, *Gorkhaland: Crisis of Statehood*. In contrast to Sarkar, Bagchi does not present a clear argument (except for proclaiming that according to Sri Aurobindo "all problems of life are, in essence, problems of harmony" (p xvii)) and rather presents a lose compilation of different aspects concerning the Darjeeling crisis and its different protagonists.

The author starts with a selective reading of Darjeeling's history in its strategically important geopolitical position among Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Bangladesh. He rightly situates the Gorkhas' demand for statehood with regard to their "identity crisis," and — similarly to Sarkar — traces its emergence back to the colonial exclusionist policy and the migratory past of the population originally stemming from Nepal. Although Bagchi acknowledges that the Gorkhas are Indian citizens, his recurrent reference to the Nepali-speaking citizens as "Nepali settlers," and the great emphasis he places on the Greater Nepal allegation (which presumes that the demand for Gorkhaland was part of a conspiracy to create a Greater Nepal including Darjeeling) is at times misleading. Thereby Bagchi not only insensitively reiterates the very factors which make the Gorkhas question their recognition as Indian citizens, but also fails to identify the deeper base of this "identity-crisis" as lying in the contradictions inbuilt in Indian nationalism, as Sarkar had demonstrated.

After the two introductory chapters that rightly situate the Gorkhaland question in broader international context, Bagchi touches various aspects including descriptions of different pro- and anti-Gorkhaland forces, the emergence of political parties in Darjeeling, comparisons of the movement leaders Subash Ghising and Bimal Gurung, elaborations on the Sixth Schedule proposal through which Ghising had sought to make Darjeeling a tribal area, alliance politics of the GJM, Bengali–Adivasi–Gorkha relations, and in a well-presented chapter, the way of functioning of the GJM, including the contrast between the party's rhetoric of Gandhism, and enacted violence and corruption. Here, Bagchi importantly points at the internal cleavages in the Gorkhaland movement and identifies factors leading to the popular downslide of the GJM, including corruption and violence against rivals such as the alleged murder of All India Gorkha League President Madan Tamang in 2010.

Blurred Accounts

Although Bagchi touches important issues, the lack of a convincing argument which connects the diverse parts renders the presentation rather an abstract mosaic of colourful stones, instead of drawing a plausible picture. Further, while the presentation of some information is nearly too detailed, it lacks analytical depth in others. The lack of reliable sources makes it hard for the reader to distinguish between the authors' personal opinion, objective descriptions, and well-researched conclusions.

All together, Bagchi's account would have benefited from more analytical depth to explain the political situation. Instead of drawing on established political or sociological concepts, his accounts are blurred by reference to pseudo-psychological explanations, disturbing references to Sri Aurobindo, or cultural determinism proclaiming, for example, that "The Gorkha community, in general, differs from the people of India as much in physical features as it does in character" (p 141), or "coupled with the simplicity of nature and sense of loyalty, [this] has given a distinctive peculiarity to the collective character of the Gorkha community" (p 142). Such "explanations" do not only blur the view on broader structures of ethno-regionalism and forms of authority, but also leave any solutions to the problem to the depth of "human nature."

Despite of these analytical and formal shortcomings, Bagchi draws some interesting conclusions regarding the relations between the statehood movement, state policy and democratic culture. Similar to Sarkar, he finds that developmental councils do not present a durable solution to the crisis. He identifies the council mode as a means to establish government-loyal elites, while shrinking the spaces for democratic process in Darjeeling itself.

> Unless a bipolar or multipolar democratic polity takes deep roots in the public life, the Gorkhaland-centric emotive politics would perpetuate itself with its concomitant disruptive virulence, to the exclusion of dissent. Democracy would continue to be permanently stricken with the crippling malady (p 210).

Another interesting extra in Bagchi's book are the transcripts of various interviews he led with different political leaders that allow the reader to get a more original glimpse on their opinions, argumentations and accounts.

Conclusions

Although both books use a different methodological approach, the resemblance of their conclusions is striking. Both point at the problematic of autonomous councils as durable solutions to ethnic conflict. Contrary to the assumption that regional autonomy leads to more participation of citizens, both studies underline that, autonomous councils, instead, lead to the exclusion of the broader public, while installing elites of state-supported political entrepreneurs. Instead of fostering development or decentralisation, autonomous councils and statehood movements themselves become means for impeding regional democratic processes expressed in the shrinking political spaces for opposition and the rule of muscle power.

The ethnic chord, as Sarkar underlined, yet lives on and provides an enduring resource for new political leaders to draw on to mobilise the masses once the public dissatisfaction with the elites has reached a saturation point. Both studies raise important questions on the future of the autonomous council model and how a more democratic governance system can be built in regions where the state appears distant to its citizens. As long as such contradictions are not properly addressed, the ethno-regional agenda will continue to be an important issue in Indian politics.

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